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ABSTRACT

Appropriately implemented vocational education programs can help achieve National Education Goal 2--increasing the high school graduation rate to at least 90 percent. A 3-year study of dropout prevention in 10 demonstration sites has resulted in an enhanced vocational education program model described in "Vocational Education for the 21st Century" (Hamby 1992) to help at-risk students graduate with skills for the competitive job market. The model has both a curriculum component and an educational support system. The curriculum component encompasses four areas: academics, vocational-technical education, employability skills training, and development of life-coping skills, a critical element for school and work success. The educational support system comprehensively addresses a number of elements: program location, instructional strategies, counseling, student management, parent involvement, and transportation, among others. The Lifelong Options Program (LOP) is a holistic approach arising out of the experiences of the demonstration sites. Its six curriculum components are as follows: vocational education, applied academics, counseling, employability skills, life coping skills, and physical education. The vocational component offers students a choice among options: vocational education curriculum, job shadowing, community-based education, work experience, and school-based business enterprise. (SK)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Vocational Education's Role in Dropout Prevention

by Susan Imel

1993

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I've been a trouble-maker at this school most of the time and have gotten terrible grades in math until this year. I'm in this Applied Math class where we work on teams to solve problems like the ones I have when I work with my father—a carpenter. I love the class and never fall asleep anymore because we learn things that I can use when I help my dad. (Presson and Pritz forthcoming)

The potential dropout quoted above demonstrates what many are coming to realize: implemented appropriately, vocational education can be a powerful force in helping achieve National Education Goal 2—increasing the high school graduation rate to at least 90 percent.

The individual and societal costs of dropping out have been well documented. According to recent estimates, each dropout represents an average loss of $58,930 in federal and state income taxes during the course of a lifetime. For the 3,881,000 dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24 years in 1991, this amounts to $228.7 billion over their lifetimes (ibid.). Innovative solutions are required to stem the waste of human potential created by dropping out. Many of the characteristics of instruction in vocational education such as its hands-on, performance-oriented approach; its connection to the workplace; and its emphasis on individual and small-group activities make it an effective mechanism for increasing high school graduation rates (Weber 1988).

This *ERIC Digest* examines the role of vocational education in dropout prevention. Following a discussion of the current context, an enhanced vocational education program model based on findings from federally funded vocational education dropout prevention projects is presented. It concludes by describing a dropout prevention program based on one of the demonstration projects.

Vocational Education's Current Context

The education reform movement has placed vocational education in a precarious position. For some time many within and outside of vocational education have argued that it must play an increasingly important role in the enhancement and reinforcement of students' basic skills and in the practical application and use of higher-order skills. To do this, however, it must develop an organized, comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges of changes in the world of work, changes in the work force, and national priorities and policies (Hamby 1992). The latter, including the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act, publication of *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce 1990), the SCANS report (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills 1991), and the adoption of *America 2000: An Education Strategy* (U.S. Department of Education 1991), "have brought vocational education to center stage of reform in public education" (Hamby 1992, p. 7).

One approach that can help vocational educators respond affirmatively to the current challenges emerges from a 3-year study of vocational education's role in preventing at-risk youth from dropping out. Funded by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, in 10 demonstration sites across the United States, the project resulted in a number of findings that have been synthesized into an enhanced vocational education program model described in ***Vocational Education for the 21st Century*** (Hamby 1992). The enhanced program is based on the experiences sites had in integrating "the best of vocational education with a variety of successful policies, practices, and strategies to reach students who have not graduated from school, who might not graduate, and who might graduate with too few effective skills to sustain them in a competitive and changing job market" (ibid., p. 2).

An Enhanced Vocational Education Program Model

Although no two of the demonstration sites were alike, they shared a number of successful strategies and practices that could be identified across projects and fit into a common framework. This framework, which includes the best elements of all projects yet is flexible enough to meet the needs of a variety of students, consists of both a curriculum component and an educational support system (ibid.).

Curriculum Component

The model's curriculum component is balanced among the following areas:

- **Academics**. Regardless of their goals following graduation, all students need to be competent in such academic areas as communicating, computing, problem solving, group living and economic self-sufficiency, understanding relationships among groups, understanding the natural world, and maintaining wellness.
- **Vocational-Technical Education**. A core set of occupational training activities and experiences is an integral part of an enhanced vocational education program. Although offerings varied across sites, each included several choices from the eight main areas of vocational education: trade and industrial education, business education, agriculture, home economics, marketing education, technical education, technology education, and health occupations. Also important are courses that count in the diploma track or lead to certification, on-the-job training, and vocational education and career exploration for middle school or early high school students as well as for at-risk high school students who are not ready to enter an occupational training program.
- **Employability Skills Training**. In addition to academic and occupational education, demonstration sites found that students also needed employability skills training to help them develop appropriate work-related characteristics and habits. Specific skills covered by this training include searching for a job (e.g., completing applications, preparing for interviews), adhering to employers' schedules, exhibiting initiative and motivation, participating as a team member, exercising leadership, and working with people from diverse backgrounds.
- **Life-Coping Skills Training**. This unique feature of enhanced vocational education curricula offers students

training designed to deal with the personal and social issues of daily living, both in and out of school, in the present and the future. Although this particular component of the comprehensive curriculum has not received as much attention as the others, project findings indicated that it was a critical element for success in school and on the job. Specific life-coping skills include developing a well-defined personal identity, identifying and dealing with personal fears, coping with different feelings and emotions, making wise choices, dealing positively with values conflicts, and choosing ethical courses of action.

The comprehensive core curriculum is designed to prepare students for lifelong employment through lifelong learning and to ensure successful living in the real world.

Educational Support System

The comprehensive curriculum described here must be supported by an equally comprehensive educational support system to ensure that the curriculum is available to students over an extended period. Results of the project indicated that an enhanced vocational education support system should address the following: program location and organization; student recruitment, selection, and orientation; instructional strategies; counseling and guidance; student management and discipline; community collaboration; parental and family involvement; staff selection and development; flexible scheduling; summer school; small class size; transportation; and district commitment and support.

The Lifelong Options Program

The Lifelong Options Program (LOP) emerged from the same federally funded demonstration programs as the enhanced vocational education model and it shares many of the characteristics of that model. Based on Project COFFEE (Cooperative Federation for Educational Experiences), LOP's major goal is to improve the academic, occupational, and personal skills of potential high school dropouts. Its curriculum is organized around six major components: vocational education, applied academics, counseling, employability skills training, life-coping skills, and physical education. Holistic in its approach, LOP has proven effective with youth who previously might not have chosen vocational education (Shirley and Pritz 1992.)

Although each LOP participant receives support from all six curriculum components, the vocational education component is the foundation of LOP. It consists of the following options from which students select:

- **Vocational Education Curriculum**. Students selecting this option receive 3 hours of regular instruction per day in their chosen occupational classes at vocational-technical centers. An advantage of this option is its compatibility with a split-day schedule that allows students to travel from home or another educational site.
- **Shadowing**. Under this option, students can shadow a number of vocational programs during their initial semester, allowing them an opportunity to select an occupation on the basis of first-hand knowledge.
- **Community-Based Education**. This option permits students to earn credit toward graduation and acquire practical learning experiences by participating in supervised jobs at local businesses.
- **Work Experience**. Students completing 50 percent of the required vocational education objectives may opt to receive credit for the balance through a job in their chosen vocational area.
- **School-Based Business**. This option permits students to participate in managing and operating a business enterprise.

The options offered by the vocational education component of the LOP curriculum permits potential dropouts to develop technical and business skills and the employability and personal skills needed for success in the current and future work force (ibid.).

LOP also has a support system component consisting of the following elements: staff selection and training; student selection, recruitment, and orientation; flexible scheduling; instructional procedures; student management; administration; and program management. These elements complement, support, and strengthen the curriculum component.

Those interested in implementing LOP can learn from the experiences of the demonstration projects, which resulted in the following recommendations: assess needs and determine vision, collaborate, market the program, communicate frequently and effectively, choose competent staff, nurture staff and students, demonstrate innovation, share experiences, and seek improvement (ibid., p. 5.1).

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